

Anton Chekhov's The Cherry Orchard and Ajitesh Bandopadhyay's Manjari Aamer Manjari: A Study in Adaptation

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ABSTRACT

Adaptation is often understood as cinematic transpositions of literature. Gerard Genette has observed that it is a 'transgeneric practice' – a specific process involving the transition from one genre to another: novels into films, dramas into musicals, the dramatization of prose fiction and vice-versa. However, talking about Ajitesh Bandoopathyay and his adaptations is a different case altogether. His drama adaptations do not involve generic shifts, but a process of 'cultural relocation'. From Tin Poysar Pala, Manjari Aamer Manjari, Sher Afgan to Bhalomanus – all are adaptations from dramatic works themselves. Although this study makes a close comparison of The Cherry Orchard and Manjari Aamer Manjari, it refuses to identify the adaptation as a 'good' or 'bad' one, maintaining a proximity to Julie Sanders' observation in Adaptation and Appropriation that such studies are 'not about making polarized value judgments, but about analysing process, ideology and methodology'.

Keywords: ADAPTATION, TEXT, INTERTEXTUALITY, *THE CHERRY ORCHARD*, *MANJARI AAMER MANJARI*

Art never improves, but ... the material of art is never quite the same.

(T.S. Eliot, Tradition and the Individual Talent)

Any study of literature, especially when it is related to 'adaptation' – a kind of rewriting – inevitably involves a reading of Eliot's theory of art and the artist. This 'rewriting' impulse of adaptation, which is much more than simple imitation, is often articulated in current theoretical terminology as 'intertextuality' – a dialogue among texts. In *Adaptation and Appropriation* Julie Sanders observes

that this process of intertextuality manifested in the form of adaptation shows 'how art creates art or how literature is made by literature'. In fact, adaptation is a process through which any 'particular literature' steps forward to become Literature. As Ajitesh Bandopadhyay himself once said, through adaptation one can either take from another country or justify the uniqueness of one's own country. The underlying implication of this observation may be that adaptation is fundamental to the practice of literature, and that it is only adaptation which brings home the sublime realization that the people of different nations, however diverse their life-styles are, belong to one universal family.

A pioneer of the Bengali group theatre movement, Ajitesh Bandopadhyay is widely recognized as an actor, producer, and writer of adapted plays. In adapting English plays, European dramatists like Tolstoy, Pirandello, Brecht and Chekhov have been his particular favourites. His *Manjari Aamer Manjari* which first came out in 1968, is based on the Russian playwright Anton Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*. Chekhov's play reflects a time when the Tsarist regime in Russia reached its finale and, as a consequence, there was the decline of the landed gentry. This hurling down of European feudalism, the fall of the century old regime became an interesting subject to the whole world. However, for the landed nobility in India it was a crawling, agonizing end which came by slow torment. In adapting *The Cherry Orchard* into *Manjari Aamer Manjari* this process of social change remains the primary concern for Ajitesh. He successfully draws on the fascination of the Bengali for the old and the antique. It sets a well-defined ground for the emergence of a new class, the proletariat so as to say, in the economic field of an independent country.

As the Forward to its first production reads, *Manjari Aamer Manjari* beautifully describes the painful passing away of a once-proud zamindar family, and so far as the dialect used in the play is concerned, the locale seems to be situated somewhere in the neighbourhood of Purulia in West Bengal.

Just as Chekhov uses the cherry orchard as a symbol of feudal Russia, so does Ajitesh in his adaptation with the mango orchard. Each is a huge natural phenomenon, spanning over a few acres of land. Chekhov's Mme Ranevskaya says, "If there is anything at all in this whole district that's still exciting, even incredible, that one thing is our cherry orchard" (*The Cherry Orchard*, 173), and Labanyaprabha echoes her Russian counterpart, "Sobai ek kothay bole na, ei anchole 100 mile-r moddhe sobcheye boro jinis holo Himsagar-r zamindar-r aam bagan?" (*Manjari Aamer Manjari*, 24). Just as the cherry orchard is named in the 'Encyclopedia', so is the mango orchard in 'Year Book'.

They bear similar significance to the characters concerned. The orchard may not produce enough mangoes to pay off the debts, but to Labanya, as to Ranevskaya, the barren trees are a world of memory, her innocent childhood and happy adolescence; 'the last flickering glow of the feudal sunset'.

To some of the contemporary audience, Chekhov's play bore an anti-revolutionary ideal. Nemirovich-Danchenko, the first director of his play at the Moscow Art Theatre, expressed his anxiety as it was "a play which is seen to lament the lost estates of the gentry". Even contemporary critical reviews claimed that Chekhov's sympathy went with the decaying aristocracy, not with the rising proletariat. As a result of such an outcome Chekhov had to somehow tone down the elegiac mood of the play, although denying any such intention of his. But adapting that play in a post-independent democratic set-up, Ajitesh had hardly to bother about such compulsive issues. It is a temporal-spatial liberation that he certainly enjoys.

In Chekhov the class difference between the aristocrats and the underlings is not shown so much through their use of language as in Ajitesh, who gives standard Bengali to the master-class and regional dialect to the lower class as such. Ranevskaya and Varya use the same English:

"Varya: I must go and see if they've brought in all the things..."

"Lyubov Andreevna: It can't really be me sitting here, can it? [Laughs] I want to jump up, leap around and wave my arms...." (171)

But the language of Labanya and Vutu is not the same,

"Vutu: Ke jane sob malpotto gulan uthan hoite samaile sumaille ughore raikheche to? Iyader aabar ja kando?"

"Labanya: O ma! Ei je bose aachhi. Ei ki aami? Sotti, aamie to na? Mone hochhe bno kore ek pak aani mani-r moto ghure jai". (22)

Thus a language-based hierarchy is apparent with Labanya, Girindra, Anima and Tapas on one side and the rest on the other. Here, of course, Sricharan's position becomes problematic.

Chekhov's sub-title to the play "A Comedy in Four Acts" invites us to an important area of discussion. Chekhov's Comedy is a vital part of his philosophy – the point where content and form meet. And this in turn relates to the subject-matter of his work – the daily lives of ordinary people.

As Vera Gottlieb points out in "Chekhov's Comedy", the playwright's view of comedy entails a "sociological survey", perhaps equalled by Zola in France and Dickens in England. It marks a point where fact and fiction blend to produce the particular kind of "heightened realism"-a special feature of Chekhov's comedy. The element of implicit 'morality' in his comedy is not simply defined by Henri Bergson's *Laughter* or George Meredith's *Essay on Comedy*. It must be seen within the context of Russian literature and the arts in general -a context which placed on the artist a kind of responsibility. The following one is a significant observation from Chekhov:

All I wanted was to say truthfully to people: 'Have a look at yourself and see how bad and dreary your lives are!'What is there to cry about in this?

For Chekhov the philosophical core of his comedy is that of a doctor who knows there is a cure. As Gottlieb further says, 'It is not the fear of death which concerns Chekhov, it is the fear of life which he exposes and presents as 'comic' in that the cure potentially lies in our own hands'. In *Manjari Aamer Manjari* Ekkari perhaps means this same 'fear of life' when he says, "bnaiche je ki sukh ta kuno boi-e lekha deikhlam nai" or "bhagaman aamake benai dhenai liye, ekat ya batkhara maire kopalta dilek fataie, boillok 'ja re byata duniyay janma liye zoile pure moirga ja!" (32). The moral of his story is that life is an endless journey of misery and pain; time passes by, opportunities are lost, unhappiness and disappointment pour in.

Ajitesh seems to have resorted to the basics of Chekhov's philosophy of 'comedy'. From the very beginning of the play, Lalmohon, the emerging economist, keeps on telling Labanya that the sale of her estate and the mango orchard is inevitable if she does not consent to his plan of building up a colony in its place. It is he who comes like a doctor to the patient (Labnaya) with the cure (his plan), but the latter remains adamant on not taking the medicine until the catastrophe becomes an actuality. Therefore, what constitutes the 'comic' here is that Labanya easily lets her orchard go, doing practically nothing to save it. Thus, at the end it becomes very significant what Lalmohon says, after he buys the estate for himself, "...kyane tokhon aamar kotha kane tullen na maa? Aami je hazar bar boile chhilam ekhon, ekhon hater dhil ekbar chhure diechhen, aar je hate ghurbe na maa." (56)

Ajitesh, very much in the manner of Chekhov, shows how everyday life holds its incongruities. There he finds sufficient materials to create the comic attitude in the audience and sufficient materials to sound the echoes of tragedy as well. Side by side Lalmohon's joy for being the new owner of the mango orchard lies his sad affection for those who have so long been his masters. He

does not get that much happiness in buying the orchard, “Maago aami sotti boilchhi maa, aamar sukh hoilo na, jodi kunodin aamader kaaro kichhu na thaikto to sei chhilo bhalo.” (56)

Such ambivalence is said to be the true source of Chekhovian comedy. After she loses the orchard Ranevskaya takes a last look round her nursery, “Good bye, my home. Fare thee well, dear old house of our fore-fathers”. With simple words Chekhov paints a picture of generations, while directly expressing the character's emotions. It is usual to expect an emotive sequel to this sentimental expression. Yet there is an ironic edge to the gesture which follows her remark. Anya, her daughter, unaffectedly sees no past standing over her like a judgement as her mother does. “Anya: Really! This is the beginning of a new life, Mama!” (205)

Ajitesh catches this exact mood and tone in Anima's reply to her mother,

“Labnaya: ... Aamra je chole jachhi, tor bhalo lagchhe mamoni, tui je bolehhili tor satti bhalo lagchhe?” “Anima: Hnya, Maa, aamar sotti bhalo lagchhe.” (62)

Thus our reception of the play is carefully put under control. What could have been a more successful use of Brechtian 'alienation effect' than this?

Ambivalence is also there in the character portrayal. There is an engagement of sympathy for Ranevskaya, whose actions may seem reprehensible. She is a woman who allows her sexuality to lead her into problems. Her modest aim for success was a happy love affair. However, the negative traits of her character seem to be compensated by the fact that for three quarters of the play she is presented as a victim of circumstances beyond her control. In his *The Dark Comedy*, J.L. Styan argues that the romantic centre of the modern drama, i.e. the hero, is replaced by a pattern of feeling which he or she may not be able to understand because it is part of them. Only the observer, i.e. the audience may see the whole pattern. Styan uses a beautiful imagery: "The beetle has a narrow view of the garden, the gardener can observe all his stupid motions, can admire his efforts, laugh at his failures, help him to safety or crush him with a touch of his toe". This is the dark comic attitude. At the centre of such attitude lies the disparity between the aspiration of the characters and the reality of their situation. In most cases there is little to stop the characters from doing what they want except themselves, and herein lies the keynote of Chekhov's comedy. Ranevskaya returns to her home to save it from being sold in auction; she cannot let the orchard mix into dust. Yet, at the end, she fails to do anything and the orchard is ready to be cut down. She has to return to Paris. Thus the whole story of *The Cherry Orchard* seems to unfold between two ordinary events- the arrival of

Ranevskaya and the departure of Ranevskaya; the *purpose* of her coming is smashed in between - the reality of the situation. It feels that she could have easily saved her estate by adhering to Lopakhin's proposal. But it was *her* decision not to lose the cherry orchard, even if it entailed the loss of the whole property.

This tension between the opposite poles of 'aspiration' and 'reality' is carried on with equal vividness in *Manjari Aamer Manjari*. Labanya continually insists on keeping the mango orchard unharmed, although knowing fully well that she is certain to lose it. Lalmohon wanted Labanya to keep the estate (the monetary value of it, of course), but he ends up buying it for himself. Similarly Durga's dream of passing for an aristocratic lady remains only a dream.

The sad comicality of everyday life in Chekhov has some strong dose of the comic as well, and Ajitesh nicely transforms them into the Bengali sense of humour. The character of Ekkari provides a good sense of humour in *Manjari Aamer Manjari*. Yepikhodov's nickname 'Two-and-Twenty Hard Knocks!' – as he suffers an endless series of farsical physical misfortunes, like stumbling over objects – is translated into Bengali as 'Ekkari-r dukkhu pnachkuri'. In case of Ekkari, our evocation of laughter works at a primary level -as Meredith says, we are prone to laugh at others' misfortunes. We even hardly sense anything serious when he consistently threatens Durga with committing suicide if she does not marry him. It is significant how Yepikhodov's 'revolver' becomes Ekkari's 'aafing' in the Bengali text.

Another of the most farcical moments in *The Cherry Orchard* takes place offstage in Act 3 where the eternal student Trofimov's pompous reaction to Ranevskaya's teasing is to march off, offended, only to fall down the stairs. Ajitesh very well takes out the humour of the situation, and the audience laughs with Anima, "Tapas da sniri te pore gachhen, Ekkari-r gaye-" (50)

Again when Vutu mistakenly hits Lalmohon on the head, the latter utters in pain, "Tui byash shokto samottha aachhis".

In "The Scenography of Chekhov" Arnold Aronson observes that for Chekhov the settings are virtual roadmaps to the psyche, and the identification of the character with the decor is so complete that if the setting were taken away, the characters would cease to exist. He quotes Chekhov:

The stage demands a degree of artifice...you have no fourth wall. Besides, the stage is art, the stage reflects the quintessence of life....

Ranevskaya's remark in Act 3 seems bear this idea of Chekhov: "Without the cherry orchard my life would lose its meaning, and if it must really be sold, then go and sell me with the orchard." (195)

If we concentrate on the setting of Act 1 of *The Cherry Orchard*, it is described as "A Room that still goes by the name of the nursery. One of the doors leads to Anya's room. It is dawn and the sun will soon come up. It is May. The cherry trees are in flower, but in the orchard it is cold, there is morning frost. The windows in the room are closed". It is not simply an identification of the locale, we are also told where the door leads. If it were Ibsen or Shaw there would be detailed description of furniture, carpets, wall coverings and the like. Commenting on this aspect of Ajitesh Bandopadhyay's *Manjari Aamer Manjari* Pabitra Sarkar in "Ajitesh Bandopadhyay: His Theatre" observes that when Labanya finally leaves her estate, sold in auction to Lalmohon, the sofas are turned upside down over one another in front of the house, and thus it becomes quite apparent that the house is no longer a place of living, but a place for buy-and-sell.

Ajitesh puts considerable emphasis on the old aristocrats' fascination for the past, "the tradition". The simultaneous action of the passing away of tradition and the attempt at clinging to it constitutes the paradox of the situation in *Manjari Aamer Manjari*. Labanya and Girindra are full of admiration of their age-long tradition, the mango orchard, yet practically they do almost nothing to save it. They can only express their shock at Lalmohon's suggestion of cutting down the orchard, in a manner similar to that of Ranevskaya and Gaev.

"Andreevna: Cut down; My dear, forgive me, but you don't know what you are talking about?"(173)
"Labanya: Aambagan? Aambagan kete falte hobe. Tumi bolchho ki Lalu!" (24)

The sentiment of a Russian mistress becomes one with that of a Bengali zamindar-patni. On finding a hundred-year-old book case, Girindra can hardly hold his sentiments back. Thus, this might be taken as another stroke of bringing forth the Bengali sentiments for what has gone by.

Ashok Kumar Banbopadhyay in "Rupantare Ajitesh Bandopadhyay" opines that Lalmohon's age stands firm at the end of Falaram's age; a strikingly incredible fact (the cutting down of the orchard) replaces an age-old system. It is a result of the conflict between the old and the new. Lalmohon, the harbinger of the new economy, speaks of this dichotomy between the two:

Puran kaal sob tortor koire paltai jeichhe. Aage ee tollate chhilo zamindar aar hashha, du-chayr ghor bamon-kait. Ekhon deshe chayrdige sob chhoto-boro kol-karkhana hoichhe.

Idhare udhare koto lotun colony goire uythchhe. Bochhor kuri bade isob jaiga aar chinay jabek nai...aami sposto deikhte pechhi -bish bochhor baade ee jaigatir upor dia aye chowra pitchdhala rasta choile geychhe, ee jhorjhoira ghortar kuno chinnha nai....

Chekhov uses a concrete metaphor to show the replacement of feudalism with capitalism - the chance-purchase of Pischik's white clay by some astonishing Englishmen. In *Manjari Aamer Manjari*, the buying of Sricharan's land by some Marwadi, for the acquisition of fire-clay, is a foreshadow of the sale of the mango orchard. The poor condition of the feudal society is evident in the speech of Anima, the last descendant of that society: "ei sara deshe aamader nijeder bolte ek chilte zami nei". (19)

What is most interesting to note here is that Lalmohon, who bears the Change in himself, thinks of living beside feudalism as such. He constantly offers his help to Labanya and seems to oppose the competitive capitalism. Hence, on Labanya's losing her orchard, he regrets, "Aamar sukh hoilo na!". Infact, a close look at the writings of Ajitesh - *Manjari Aamer Manjari*, *Tin Paisar Pala*, *Sher Afgan*, *Bhalo Manush*, *Paap Punya* or *Soudagarer Nouka* - reveals this kind of affection for the lost life.

Since *Manjari Aamer Manjari* is a work in adaptation and Lalmohon's is a very important character, Ajitesh could well have made him the instrument of saving feudal economy. But his Communist and socialist ideology seemed to stand in his way to do that. And this proves that however an artist tries to evade, the ideological forces make themselves felt by him. Ajitesh, just in the manner of Chekhov, presents a symbolic situation under a wholly naturalistic guise. Neither Labanya nor Lalmohon seem to be aware of the forces present with them on the stage at moments of decision.

A study of *Manjari Aamer Manjari* focusses on specific areas of translation, such as dialogue between characters without any apparent ideological implications. The names of Chekhov's characters are translated into well-matched Bengali ones: Lyubov is Labanyaprabha, Lopakhin is Lalmohon, Yasha Ishwar, Trofimov Tapas and Firs is Falaram. Their names resonate with class-difference among them. Although Vutu is Anima's cousin and also her mother's adopted daughter, the name 'Anima' speaks well of the difference between herself and Vutu. There is this implicit working of the politics of translation.

Deviation from the source is quite natural in a work of adaptation. The major intervention in the Bengali text is the omission of Charlotta who played an important function in Chekhov. Cynthia Marsh in "The Representation of Chekhov's Women" says that Charlotta's function is to raise a

question mark over realist theatre as much as over femaleness through her cross-dressing, her uncertainty as to who she is, her rootlessness. She also questions the naturalist framework 'where character is deeply dependent upon environment and women regarded as particularly contained within it'. Another significant alteration occurs in Scene 2. In *The Cherry Orchard*, a passer-by, slightly drunk, enters and recites, "Oh my brother, my suffering brother...come out to the Volga, whose moan...".(188) In *Manjari Aamer Manjari*, the passer-by becomes Shuklal, but he is not given any of such song to recite. Here the change, alongwith that of Charlotta, does not seem to be a qualitative one. The passer-by's song in Chekhov's play had serious implications of the change of social order in Russia.

There may also arise a talk over the politics of locale. The industrial growth in Chinsurah of Bengal makes it a point of happy comparison with Chekhov's Moscow. Ranevskaya's place of refuge, Paris, becomes Beneras or Kashi in *Manjari Aamer Manjari*. An adaptation is a re-reading of the original and here the character of Labanya is worth studying. Ranevskaya leaves Kharkov to stay with her libertine lover in Paris. The amoral, if not immoral, side of Ranevskaya is also focused during her teasing of young Trofimov on the question of love. Labanya's character is not given any such shades. Beside, whenever her stay in Beneras is spoken of, there is always a sense of religiosity attached to it. The change is significant, and so the station master's singing of "The Sinful Woman" finds no place in Ajitesh's reading.

This study finally makes an attempt to compare the characters of the plays, an aspect dealt in little with the character of Ranevskaya/Labanya. The character of Lalmohon is portrayed with as much subtlety as Lopakhin's. His owning of the orchard and his rational planning betray his capitalist mind-set. Despite the moral touch added to her character, does Labanya appear as impressive as Ranevskaya? After having two children Ranevskaya falls in love with another person when her husband dies; to forget the memory of his drowned son, she leaves her house and stays away; there she falls in debt as her lover falls ill; to pay off the dept she mortgages her house and goes to Paris; there her lover deserts her with another lady; she stays there alone until her daughter brings her home. Such an expansion of a tangled life is hardly felt in Labanya, who only leaves her house to forget the dreadful memory of her son. Hence, the liveliness felt on her return to her old home does not match with that of Labanya. Of course, it's the dramatist's own reading of the character of Ranevskaya.

Therefore, what basically remains the focal point that Ajitesh bases his translation on is the dynamic aspect of 'social change'. The Marxist critic and philosopher Georg Lukacs finds the concept of Brechtian epic theatre in such depiction:

Even without alienation effects, the writers have succeeded not just in surprising the audience, but in moving them profoundly by dramatizing the contradictions of a given social order.

This is how both Chekhov and Ajitesh seem to guide 'the viewing' of their audience. Living in a time when the 'work' is replaced by the 'text' (in order of importance), and the exclusivity of 'the author' is put under a question mark, it would perhaps be all right to say that Ajitesh Bandopadhyay's adaptation adds to 'the text' of 'social transformation', represented or rather 'written' by Chekhov in *The Cherry Orchard*. An adaptation always remains truthful to the original, yet it becomes a work of a true artist only when it frees itself from the shadow of the source text. The debate that has raged around canon formation in literary studies in recent decades is also inescapable in this context. As Julie Sanders says, 'Adaptation both appears to require and to perpetuate the existence of a canon, although it may in turn contribute to its ongoing reformulation and expansion'. In this sense the canonical status of *The Cherry Orchard* is veritably marked by its adaptation, *Manjari Aamer Manjari*; they become, in Eliot's terminology, the signifiers of 'tradition' and 'individual talent'.

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Julie Sanders' appropriation of Eliot's iconic line from "Tradition and the Individual Talent" at the outset of her book is also incorporated here at the very beginning.

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